

## Have You Tried Clicker Training?

*It's all about positive reinforcement, plenty of patience — and lots of yummy treats.*

As long as there have been dogs, there have been theories about how to train them. From early settlers who used dogs to protect the farm to modern flyball enthusiasts who coax their animals into amazing feats of agility, trainers have used a variety of methods limited only by their imagination.

Until recently, most had something in common: the use of corrections to let the dog know when he'd done something wrong. These ranged from minor (the leash pop, verbal corrections) to abusive (beating the dog). While many of these training methods were effective at deterring behavior, their use would often result in a timid or fear-aggressive dog and do damage to the human-canine bond.

However, a technique that eschews corrections in favor of positive reinforcement has been gaining ground over the last two decades and is now the method of choice for many trainers. It's called clicker training, and the tools are simple: a plastic clicker or other sound-making device, plenty of treats and some time and patience.

### **What Is Clicker Training?**

Clicker training for dogs was first popularized (and has since been developed and extended) by Karen Pryor, who in the 1960s became one of the first dolphin trainers in the U.S. She based her training methodologies on well-established psychological principles.

She expanded her techniques into training other animals, including pigs, birds, fish and dogs. In 1975, she authored *Lads Before the Wind: Diary of a Dolphin Trainer*. In 1985, she published *Don't Shoot the Dog: The New Art of Teaching and Training*, a landmark book on training people and animals using positive reinforcement.

Pryor incorporated the use of a plastic sound-making device into her methodologies in the early 1990s and coined the phrase "clicker training." Today, it's a very popular approach that has given rise to dozens of books, websites, mailing lists and training seminars worldwide.

So what, exactly, is clicker training? It's a philosophy and process that uses the principles of operant conditioning and behavior modification, propounded by psychologist B. F. Skinner, and gets its name from the use of a clicker — a small plastic box with a metal insert that makes a distinctive sound when pressed. (Trainers may also use a retractable ballpoint pen, a whistle or even a verbal click — anything that makes a distinctive, consistent sound.)

Although the science behind the method is extensive, the basics are quite simple: The trainer elicits or observes a behavior, marks it by using the clicker, and reinforces it by



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offering an immediate reward, usually a treat. If the animal offers the wrong behavior or no behavior, there is no click and no treat — but also no correction. In short, the dog simply gets nothing. "Either (the dog) gets a zero or a one," says Pryor. "If he gets a one, good! The dog's aim is to get more ones."

### **Corrections and the Clicker**

Avoiding all correction is essential to creating the right clicker mindset. According to Pryor, allowing the dog to experiment without fear of reprisals is the key to easy training. "We find that a regimen that includes correction for mistakes develops a learner that is careful and cautious and doesn't want to make any mistakes," she says. "And this is even when your corrections are very mild."



Instead of conditioning a wary pup, you want to develop a dog who wants to try anything to get that click. "When we're reinforcing, we have two choices: We can click the behavior, or let it go by unclicked," she says. "The fact that they didn't get reinforced is pure information for the dog; there's no downside to it. It just tells them, 'Oh, I didn't get it right; I'll try something else.' You want the dog thinking about how to make you click."

Pryor does, however, make a distinction between correction as a tool for learning and correction in everyday life: "I'm not saying you can't say 'no' to the dog when it tries to filch something off the kitchen counter."

The use of the clicker or other marker is an important part of this training approach. Spoken reinforcers — such as saying, "Good dog!" to a desired behavior — leave too much room for interpretation due to variables such as timing, tone of voice, pitch, associated body language and so on, says Pryor. The click (or whistle, or tongue click) is emotion-neutral and can be timed exactly to the desired behavior so the dog gets the message, "That's it, right there! That's the behavior!"

### **Get Clicking!**

Clicker training is easy to master, even for novice trainers. This makes it ideal for someone just starting out with a dog, but also enables people who've been using other training methods to make a smooth transition.

To introduce your dog to clicker training, first teach him that the click represents a treat. Show him the clicker and let him sniff it. Then click it — and immediately give him a tasty morsel. Repeat click/treat, click/treat until you notice that the dog begins looking for the treat when he hears the sound.

Some dogs are put off by the loud click. If this happens, you can press the clicker while it's in your pocket, or use another object to create a distinctive noise: a short tweet of a whistle, a retractable ballpoint pen, the bubble in the metal lid of a Snapple bottle, etc.

As soon as you see your dog prick its ears when it hears the click, or look attentively for a treat when it hears the noise, you're ready to move on to the next step: clicking for behaviors.

### **Starting with Sit**

Many owners like to start with that most basic of dog behaviors: the sit. Start by holding the clicker in your dominant hand and a treat in the other. Hold the treat above your dog's head, between his ears, so he looks up. When he does, click and treat. Repeat, clicking and rewarding for every upward look.

Next, move the treat backward a bit while you are bending over the dog. Many dogs will naturally sit at this point. If yours does, click and treat; if yours doesn't, click any movement that even slightly lowers his tail end. Continue

to click and treat. Eventually, the dog will sit; click, treat and then step away. See if the dog will come to you and offer the sit without any suggestions or lures from you. If he does, click and treat. If he doesn't, click and reward eye contact, and repeat the above directions.

Don't try to push the dog into a sit or otherwise position him. The object in clicker training is to let the dog offer the behavior, not to force him into performing a behavior for you.

According to Pryor, you should click often in this early training, even if the exact behavior hasn't been achieved yet; it's better to get a click for nothing much, such as eye contact, rather than letting the dog go for longer periods without a reward.

Don't worry if your dog jumps up out of the sit after the click to get his treat. As long as you are clicking while he is giving you the desired behavior, you're doing the right thing — and so is your dog.

As your dog becomes more proficient, you can increase the length of time the dog remains in the sit position by delaying the click. And once your dog sits for you every time you have the clicker or treats, you can begin to add a verbal association to the behavior. Wait until your dog begins to sit; then, before his rear hits the floor, say "Sit." Click and treat when he sits. Repeat several times; then ask him to sit before he begins the behavior. Click and treat. (If he sits without your verbal command, don't click and treat.)

Eventually, the word replaces the click, and you can phase out the treats over time to include a pat, a scratch or another positive reinforcer. Initial training sessions should be short and fun; just five minutes can lay a solid foundation for future training. If your dog begins to get restless or stops paying attention, end the session. It may take several sessions to elicit and reinforce desired behaviors, so be patient. And above all: no corrections!

### **Teaching Any Dog Click-Tricks**

One of the biggest benefits of clicker training is that it can apply to any dog, from young puppies to older dogs that have been through several other training regimens.

"They don't have to reach a certain age; you don't have to proceed slowly; you don't need a lot of repetition," says Pryor. "All you need is a dog that's trying to make you click."

Clicker training can be used to develop basic behaviors, such as sit and stay, to control problem behaviors, such as excessive barking and jumping, and to design elaborate tricks and chains of behavior. The possibilities are limited only by the trainer.

Perhaps the biggest boon of clicker training is that it creates a mutually rewarding partnership and communication between you and your dog. You're both working to achieve desired behaviors. When you attain them, both of you get the happy glow of a job well done. ❖ By C.C. Holland